

NORTH FORK BEAR NEWS

Note From the Editor

We're back! The North Fork Bear News was an annual newsletter that Amy Secrest, with layout assistance from Richard Wackrow, created and thoughtfully published from 2000-2005. A big shout out and thanks to the both of them for all their work! I have humbly taken up the mantle, and with support from the North Fork Preservation Association, plan to resume a yearly spring mailing to any and all North Forkers who would like to receive it. I would like to encourage any feedback you may have on this issue, but even more so any suggestions for content you would like to see in the future (my contact info can be found on page 6). It is our hope that this newsletter be educational, interesting, and inspiring; not only a way to stay informed on the wildlife that we are lucky enough to cohabitate alongside, but also to celebrate the ways that we are all connected to each other as the North Fork community.

- Julie Zeigler



Bears and People in the North Fork

Bears are some of the more notorious members of the North Fork wildlife community. Late March is usually when folks start asking one another if they've seen any bear sign. Bears will soon be awake and looking for food until November/December when the season beckons them back to their dens.

Bears are opportunistic omnivores. Although they feed on a variety of natural foods far away from cabins and towns, their foraging can lead them close to human establishments where they sometimes find alternative sources of food. That is when bears and people get into trouble with each other.

Bears that succeed in obtaining food from people will remember where and how they got it, and will likely return. These bears are termed "food conditioned". Anecdotally, in the early 2000s, a "local" North Fork grizzly named Stahr once travelled 20 miles in a single night; making a loop from Home Ranch Bottoms, to the Hostel, to the Merc, to Numa Ridge Rd, to the old Nature Conservancy and back, all in search of food rewards she had received in the past! Bears that have grown accustomed to the presence of people- but have not yet received food rewards- are termed "habituated". (Continued on page 2)



Valuable Tips for Living in Bear Country

- Keep pet food, garbage, human food, and all odorous items secure in a sturdy, fully enclosed building away from doors and windows, or in a certified bear-proof container.
- Haul garbage to the dump as often as possible.
- Feed pets inside. If it is absolutely not possible to do so, bring uneaten pet food inside as soon as possible and NEVER leave out overnight.
- Keep coolers, refrigerators, and freezers inside.
- Clean and securely store barbecue grills after use.
- If you keep a garden, consider the use of an electric fence around the perimeter.
- Do not keep compost piles.
- If a bear is in your yard and is not just “passing through”, make noise by banging pots and pans together and yelling to try and get it to leave. Do not approach the bear.
- Own bear spray and know how & when to use it. Be sure to check the expiration date.
- Report any issues or unusual bear behavior immediately. Early reporting is key. See “Who to Contact” on page 5.

(Bears & People cont...)

Food conditioned and habituated bears are far more dangerous than their non-conditioned brethren because they have essentially lost their natural inclination to avoid people. A bear that does not choose to avoid people or developed sites may physically challenge humans- especially if food is at stake. If a female with cubs becomes food conditioned or habituated, she will pass this behavior on to her cubs. Sadly, these conditioned bears will end up euthanized more often than not.

With more people moving to the North Fork every year, and even more visiting and recreating in the area, the potential for problematic encounters between bears and humans is on the rise. It's up to us all to stay informed on the best practices to make sure that we are not contributing to the problem.

A Who's Who of the North Fork's "Local Bears" with Tim Manley

Tim Manley, aka the grizzly guru, has been working for three decades in northwestern Montana (currently with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks), and has spent a significant amount of that time in the North Fork. No doubt many of you have already met Tim- at an Interlocal meeting, Bear Fair, over a cup of coffee in your kitchen, or on your property with a grizzly in sight- and have benefitted from his wisdom and expertise.

The history of Tim's work in the North Fork is fascinating, and we hope to cover more of it in future issues. But for now, here is a brief summary (by way of Tim's notes) of the grizzly bears that were captured, collared, and monitored for management in the North Fork drainage in the last 5 years.

Adam: Subadult male. Captured on 5/11/16 on private property north of Ford, habituated, near houses, grazing on lawn. Did a hard release on site. Recaptured on 6/14/2017 on private property near Vance Hill to change collar, released south of Polebridge. September 2017, dropped his radio collar in Red Meadow Creek. Killed on 10/22/17 by an arrow from a crossbow along the Flathead River, south of Columbia, by a deer hunter.

Tommy: Subadult male. Incidental capture on 6/25/16 on a private residence on Moose Creek, collared, released onsite. Was with a sibling that was not captured. Dropped his collar late that

summer on upper Moose Creek digging squirrel caches. We were trying to capture an adult female (see Patti, below).

Patti: Adult female. Recaptured on 8/1/16 on private property, after breaking into 3 camp trailers near Red Meadow Creek. Also got into a garage on Moose Creek in July where Tommy was captured. Euthanized due to her history of conflicts. She was originally captured on 11/9/2008 with her sister Betsy on private property north of Ford. Betsy dropped her collar but is believed to still be alive.

Monica: Adult female with 2 cubs of the year. Recaptured spring of 2017 and collared for trend monitoring on private property, south of Polebridge. Released onsite. In 2018 the family group began causing conflicts in the area around Polebridge. We captured and removed both of her yearlings in 2018. Monica dropped her radio collar south of Home Ranch in 2019. A female with 3 cubs of the year was observed

and photographed in the Hay Creek area in the spring of 2020. We think that was Monica.

Monica's yearling M: Yearling male. Captured north of Polebridge on 10/21/18. Conflicts involved getting into unsecured garbage, damage to a yurt, and damage to a car. Decision was made to euthanize him.

Monica's yearling F: Yearling female. Captured north of Polebridge on 10/21/18. Conflicts involved getting into unsecured garbage, damage to a yurt, and damage to a car. Decision was made to euthanize her.

Oattie: Subadult male. Captured on 10/21/18 in an oat field south of Polebridge. Very habituated. Causing bear jams. People walking very close to take photos. Relocated to Packers Roost in GNP. Returned to the NF. Traveled from Home Ranch to Canada. We triggered his collar to drop off in the summer of 2020 (concerned his collar might get too tight).

A Conversation with John Waller, Wildlife Biologist for Glacier National Park

Bear News (BN): Can you introduce yourself and what it is you do in Glacier Park?

John Waller (JW): My official title is Supervisory Wildlife Biologist, but currently my position is Carnivore Program Manager. Bear management is only about half my job. I also work with many other species including wolves, lions, wolverines, mountain goats, bats, & fish. I've been involved with bear management in GNP since 2002. Prior to that, I spent 4 years with the Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinators office, and 10 years with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. So, I've been involved with bear research and management for about 33 years.

BN: What is the best estimate for both the grizzly and black bear populations with home

territories in GNP? How did you come to these numbers?

JW: This is the question I get asked most frequently and it's probably the hardest to answer. It's also maybe the least interesting. For example, if I answered 165 grizzly bears in the park, or I answered 210 grizzly bears in the park, would these different answers cause you to think any differently about the population? Radio collar and DNA data has shown us that about half the grizzly bears in the park spend part of their time outside the park, so the actual number of bears in the park likely varies daily. Also, because bears are notoriously difficult to count, all population numbers are estimates with associated confidence intervals. Usually, the more intensive (and expensive) the

research, the tighter the confidence interval around the true value. The best research we have, and may ever have, is Kate Kendall's DNA study conducted in 2004. This study cost millions of dollars but established a grizzly bear population estimate for the entire Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, (NCDE), with a very tight confidence interval. That number was 765 (95% CI: 715-831). Beginning in 2004, and continuing to the present, we began a program of radio collaring female grizzly bears across the NCDE to monitor their survival and reproduction. These metrics allow us to calculate the population trend, (increasing or decreasing), based on that initial value from 2004. Since 2004, the population has been increasing at about 1-3%/year. So, we are confident that the NCDE population today is over 1,000 grizzly bears. There are no reliable estimates of grizzly bear population size for Glacier National Park alone - the park boundaries are a human thing, not a bear thing.

BN: Could you briefly describe the typical activity in a year of a bear's life? What/when they eat, how far they roam, when and how they den, etc?

JW: Grizzly bears will emerge from their winter dens in March/April. Typically, adult males

emerge first, around mid-March, while females with cubs emerge last in late April/May. The adult males will travel widely in the early spring, often hundreds of miles, to establish the presence of receptive females. After hanging around the den site for a couple weeks, the bears will move to lower elevations to feed on early spring green-up and winter-killed carrion. Grizzlies here are 'elevational migrants', meaning they follow the greening vegetation, (grass, forbs, roots), up in elevation as the season progresses. In July, the breeding season ends, and bears shift their focus to berries; the big 3 are huckleberry, service berry, and buffalo berry. The bears try to pack as much weight on as they can, a process termed 'hyperphagia', to prepare for denning. In September, the arrival of colder weather causes the berries to desiccate and drop, so the bears go back to forbs and roots and scavenging carrion where they can find it, especially as hunting season arrives in the fall. By November, most bears are looking for places to den. Grizzly bears den at high elevations while black bears typically den at lower elevations. Grizzly bears will usually dig a new den into a steep slope each year. By the time the snow starts to pile up, they'll be snug and secure and won't emerge until spring. Pregnant females will give birth to cubs in the den in January or early February.

Concerning Bird Feeders

- Do not use bird feeders from April 1st to December 1st. Bird species that live here do not require supplemental feeding by humans during this time, and birdseed is irresistible to bears. Instead, try placing a nest box or a bird bath in the yard to enhance bird watching opportunities.
- Hummingbird feeders are also an attractant and should be avoided. As a safe (and beautiful) alternative, you could replace them with hanging flower baskets. Hummingbirds really go for fuchsias!



BN: Have you noticed an increase in human-bear interactions or conflicts correlated to the increase in GNP visitation over the last few years? What have been the most successful ways you've found to avoid conflicts?

JW: Human-bear conflicts in the park have been declining for decades. We haven't had to remove a 'problem grizzly' since 2009, black bear removals number less than 1 per year, and bears haven't injured a person in years. This is huge progress for a park that used to be known as a place where people were regularly killed by bears - and all this despite significantly increasing visitation. I credit this record to aggressive enforcement of food and garbage storage regulations, proactive application of aversive conditioning techniques, and the widespread acceptance and use of bear spray.

BN: The North Fork too, has seen exponential growth in visitation and recreational use, and thus more human-bear interactions. Most often by way of crowds gathering to watch bears graze or cross the road. What advice would you

give NF locals concerned with habituation on how best to respond to these kinds of situations when we see them?

JW: I like to emphasize that humans are too dangerous and unpredictable to be allowed near bears. A bear behaving naturally in a good place should be left alone to do its thing, undisturbed. If you want to watch it, do so at a respectful distance (at least 100 yds). A bear in a bad place, like in a yard or along a road, should be chased off. This teaches the bear boundaries and may ultimately save its life. They should never be fed or be allowed to access garbage or human foods, (including pet and livestock feeds). This almost always ends badly for the bear.

BN: How many bears have been trapped and collared in GNP in the last 5 years or so? Were they relocated? Have any been euthanized?

JW: We usually trap and radio collar 2-4 grizzly bears per year in the park as part of the population trend monitoring project. It's challenging to trap bears in the park due to the short season and all the visitors. Rarely do we trap, radio collar, and relocate bears for management purposes, although last year we did trap and relocate a young female grizzly bear that was feeding on spilled grain along the railroad tracks at Marias Pass. Efforts to chase the bear off weren't successful and we were concerned that she would be hit and killed by a train. We moved her up to Anaconda Cr. in the North Fork but have not had any success finding her since then. Hopefully, she'll turn up this spring!

Since 2016, we've had to euthanize 5 bears. 3 were mortally injured, (by cars, falls, or other bears), and 2 were destroyed for aggressively seeking human food - one was breaking into vehicles and the other was inside a residence.

BN: Thank you for your time, John. Last question. What is one of your favorite fun facts about bears?

JW: A single litter of bear cubs could represent different fathers!

Who to Contact

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Tim Manley, grizzly bear management specialist with Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks:

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Erik Wenum, black bear and mountain lion specialist with Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks:

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Cartoon Caption Contest



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Ok Northforkers, what do you think?!

The top 3 winning captions will be printed in the next issue of Bear News. Winners will receive a framed copy of the cartoon with their caption, as well as a \$20 gift certificate to Home Ranch! Submissions will be accepted via email at julienelson406@gmail.com, or physical mail at 390 Moose Creek Rd. through August 31st, 2021. Have fun!

GRIZZLY AND BLACK BEAR IDENTIFICATION



The North Fork Bear News

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